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Russians Settle For Bombast in Mideast Crisis

The Russians did their usual huffing and puffing over the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, but never went beyond rhetorical flourishes.

My intelligence sources tell me this may have been because Soviet leaders were afraid the Israeli war machine was too strong for the kind of limited intervention that was the Kremlin's only real option. Or, as Marx might have put it (Groucho, that is), the big bully was confronted by a little bully and didn't want to risk a bloody nose.

As soon as Israeli tanks crossed the Lebanese border, the Soviets put their forces in the Middle East on full alert. This included the Soviets' Mediterranean fleet and an airborne division in the Caspian area, a few hundred miles north of Lebanon.

Except for a few alarmists, State Department and CIA analysts discounted the Soviet alert as a prelude to direct intervention in support of the Soviet-supplied Syrians and Palestinians.

They pointed out that this would be unprecedented. Previous Soviet intervention—in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan and Poland—

has been confined to countries that are not only contiguous to the Soviet Union, but already within the Kremlin's orbit. Soviet military meddling elsewhere, as in Angola and Ethiopia, has been done by the Russians' Cuban and East German surrogates.

The experts' complacency was jarred by an ominous Kremlin communique on June 14: "The Soviet Union takes the Arabs' side not in words but in deeds, and presses to get the aggressor out of Lebanon. The present-day Israeli policy-makers should not forget that the Middle East is in an area lying in close proximity to the southern borders of the Soviet Union, and that developments there cannot help affecting the interests of the U.S.S.R. We warn Israel about this."

The intelligence community began to take a second look at its information on the Soviet military alert. They noted that the Soviet Navy's squadron in the eastern Mediterranean had been beefed up by the addition of some surface warships, and that a Soviet airborne division in the Caspian area had been put on "special alert."

In fact, they knew the Soviets had already expanded their military forces in areas looking out Russia's "southern window" toward the Persian Gulf. A recent highly sensitive Pentagon report seen by my associate Dale Van Atta supplied the figures:

"A large increase has taken place

in the Soviet forces located in the nearby Caucasus and Turkestan Military Districts. Twenty-six ground divisions, with 250,000 men on active duty, are now located in those districts and in Afghanistan."

The report also noted the presence in this Soviet force of "first-category airborne divisions" and, most significantly, a "command and control capability necessary to conduct large-scale military operations."

It seemed, as a State Department analysis put it, that Soviet intervention "becomes a distinct likelihood . . . in the event of a serious threat to the Syrian government."

So why didn't the Soviets make their move? Intelligence experts offered several reasons. One was that the Palestinians themselves would have been unhappy about direct Soviet intervention. Another was that the Kremlin lacked a solid pretext for armed intervention.

But the most interesting explanation is that the Russians were leery of risking an embarrassing military defeat at the hands of Israel. For example, an airborne invasion would require Soviet control of the air. But destruction of the Syrians' entire surface-to-air missile strength had given Israel total air superiority.

In short, a modest "police action" could be disastrous for the Soviets, and the Kremlin was not prepared to escalate into a full-scale war with Israel. So it settled for bombast instead of bombs.